

COLUMBIA DAILY SPECTATOR
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Feedback

CIA on campus: open, legitimate contact

To the Editor:

There are serious errors of fact and interpretation in Spectator's story headlined "CIA Covertly Recruited Prospects In a March 1977 Visit To Campus," published April 18, 1980. In trying to uncover the blacked-out name in a CIA document retrieved through the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act, Spectator put the number of blacked-out spaces together with its campus directory and came up, wrongly, with the name of Herschel Webb, Professor of Japanese History and currently Chairman of the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures. It then proceeded to detail the process by which Prof. Webb supposedly spoke covertly to a CIA recruiter on March 28, 1977.

It is stated in the article that Webb explained that he was not Chairman of the department on that date, and Spectator confirmed this by checking with the Dean's office. In spite of this, and in spite of the fact that there is no way that the name of Herschel Webb can be reckoned as 14 letters, the number supposedly blacked-out by the CIA censor, the newspaper then went ahead and smeared Prof. Webb for having "covert" contacts with the CIA. Spectator owes Prof. Webb a complete and speedy apology.

It happens that I was the Acting Chairman of the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures on March 28, 1977, and it was I who spoke to the CIA recruiter. But let me assure Spectator that there was nothing "covert" about this meeting at all. It is true that I knew the CIA man: he was a former student of this university, though not of the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures. During the weekend of March 25-27, the annual meeting of The Association for Asian Studies took place downtown in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, and this CIA man, with a big AAS nametag displaying prominently and openly his name and the words "Central Intelligence Agency," was there openly recruiting — a sight not uncommon at academic and professional meetings of all sorts. I had not seen him in a long time. The following Monday he called at my office, said he was winding up his weekend recruiting trip to New York for the CIA, and asked if I knew of any prospects. I gave no names. I don't remember that I said I'd "be on the lookout for qualified prospects," but if I did that was my way of changing the subject. I repeat that this was an open contact: I knew who he was, and he knew I knew, and it occurred in the wake of a professional meeting at which hundreds of people had seen him openly recruiting. For Spectator to assert in its headlines that this was a "covert" meeting, given the general connotation of that word when used in the context of the CIA, was a slanderous smear.

The general tone of the recent series on the CIA suggests an institution of unrelenting evil, with which any contact is automatically defiling. I certainly agree that genuinely covert CIA connections with the university community — as for instance with secret and misleadingly labeled sources of funding for academic research, are inimical to the spirit and meaning of an academic community and ought to be exposed, rejected and condemned. But when a CIA man openly reveals his identity and purposes, where is there anything covert? Even Spectator, in the same issue of p. 2, right beside the article, published an open CIA advertisement for foreign language specialists. My "contact" was equally open. Is not the CIA, in acting thus, in fact responding to responsible criticism to operate in the open? Spectator seems determined to find covert behavior even where there is none.

One more thought occurs to me. On the occasion when I have been openly approached by recruiters for various intelligence agencies, such as NSA and the CIA, I have never given any names. My own feelings were that I just didn't want to cooperate, even openly, with the CIA in this way. Yet, as a professor involved in the training of graduate students, a significant amount of my time must be devoted to helping my students get jobs. Who am I to say that a student should not work for the CIA? That is the student's choice, not mine. I can imagine a situation, although I don't think it has occurred, when a student might expect me to promote his cause, even with the CIA. Thus, there is nothing shameful or reprehensible even in providing the names of prospects to such a recruiter, provided that the process is open and above-board and that no confidentiality is asked for or expected, and for Spectator to mislabel such a process as "covert" and condemn it by innuendo, is shameful and reprehensible in itself.

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